

A Reflection on Dramaturgy in Reference to *Silence* by Moira Buffini

by

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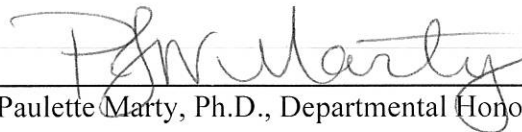
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Thesis Reflection

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If I had been asked to define “Dramaturgy” a year ago, I would have thought first: is the “g” in dramaturgy supposed to be a hard “g” sound or a soft? And after a lot of deliberation I would have opted for the hard “g” sound, and subsequently been incorrect. Then, with the aid of a memory from a class I took my freshman year, I would have suggested (with slight hesitation) that dramaturgy is defined as being the practice of a dramaturg. Pretty straightforward right? I would have gone on to explain that dramaturgy comes from the Greek word *dramatourgia*, and that the word itself can be broken into two parts, one being “drama” coming from the Greek “*dran*” which means to do, and the other part “urgy” meaning worker. I’d point out that knowing this suggests then that the true definition of dramaturgy might be something along the lines of “a worker of plays”, or “a drama maker” even. I’d quote that a good dramaturg could be compared to a deep-sea diver, that a dramaturg is often the smartest person in a room, and that in a production team, dramaturges are the gatherers of information. More than likely, this would have sufficed as an answer to the initial question. However, I would have failed to explain what it was a dramaturg *actually* does. And the reason for this is because until taking on the role of dramaturg myself this past year for the play *Silence* by Moira Buffini, I hadn’t the slightest idea.

It was this ignorance on the subject matter of dramaturgy that left me terrified when first approached by Dr. Paulette Marty, about potentially serving as head dramaturg for *Silence* (*Silence* is a dark comedy set in Anglo-Saxon/Viking England, about the social pressure to conform, the fluidity of personal identity, and the perils of violent nationalism as told by a group of young adults attempting to defy a king.) last February. At that point in my career as both an artist and a student, my relationship with dramaturgy had been sparse. What little experience I did have in the field was both brief and within the context of a “dramaturgy team” for the previous year’s production of *Clybourne Park* by Bruce Norris. The idea of singularly taking on the tasks I saw previously *barely* completed by a small dramaturgical militia seemed foolhardy at best. If I’m honest the only reason I initially agreed to serving as head dramaturg for *Silence* was due to the immense flattery I felt in being requested for the position by someone I respected. My thought at the time was: if they think I have what it takes to be successful in this, maybe I do? But I had my doubts.

Upon accepting the position of dramaturg, I was then asked to state my personal goals for the position. Generally speaking my goal was to learn, under the advisory of a more seasoned dramaturg, the duties of a dramaturg and how to successfully carry out those duties. Apparently however, that was too vague of a goal to satisfy the requirement of me pursuing this experience for my departmental honor’s thesis project. So I developed four personal learning goals for myself in addition to and informed by the umbrella goal of learning how to be an effective dramaturg. These goals were reviewed and approved by the faculty of the theatre department here at Appalachian State University.

First, I aimed to strengthen my skillset in articulating information to a group. Theatre is all about communication whether it comes in the form of a playwright communicating a

story to a reader, or an actor communicating a character to an audience, or even a lighting designer communicating tone and mood and color to a computer. In all of these examples communication and collaboration are the goal. Therefore, a main selling point on the success of a dramaturg is their ability to get information across to a team of individuals, this is a team consisting of directors, actors, and multiple designers, just to name a few. A dramaturg must get palatable pertinent information to all of these people in a way that best suits that individual and the production, so that the team might more easily visualize the same world and then effectively communicate that world to each other and an audience night after night. I personally am not the most confident in my ability to navigate language, at least not verbally. I love language, but given my disabilities, (I am hard of hearing and dyslexic) I sometimes feel that language, and I are star-crossed lovers. It is for this reason that I made strengthening my ability to articulate ideas and perspectives to a group a personal learning goal.

Second, I wanted to be a dramaturg not only for the production team, but for the audience. As a dramaturg, there are so many routes you can take in terms of what information you gather, and then what you do with the information once you've gathered it. Yet a lot of times the information that is gathered by a dramaturg is only ever seen by the production team and the actors. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but in my personal opinion it only makes sense to try and share as much of that information with the audience. Luckily, throughout my undergraduate career I have been exposed to highly proactive and interactive dramaturgy. This exposure influenced me greatly as a dramaturg, and has led me to realize the importance of preparing an audience to be receptive to a show. I am aware that a show should be comprehensible without SparkNotes, but I believe well executed dramaturgy can

enrich an already understandable production. It is for this reason that a major goal of mine set out during this process was to develop an interactive lobby display. I wanted a lobby display that engaged with the audience, and communicated both the rich however pastiche historical context of *Silence*, as well as suggest the evaluation of themes within the production as a whole.

Third, and perhaps the most simplistic goal I set out to achieve during this process was to learn how a production meeting should be run. For the majority of my undergraduate career my niche in theatre was acting. Being an actor you aren't really required (though you are encouraged) to understand the technical and logistical aspects of putting on a production. That being said, it is my experience that the most effective theatre artist tends to be multifaceted. Serving as dramaturg for *Silence* I wanted to attend as many production meetings as possible so as to learn how a production meeting should be run, as well as how to effectively contribute to a production meeting as a dramaturg and a student.

Fourth and finally, a goal that coupled more directly with my general goal of wanting to understand the task of a dramaturg and how to complete it, was the desire to observe the process of directing. In addition to this, I wanted to learn how a dramaturg and the director relationship should work, so that I might strive for that dynamic in the future. I myself have a strong desire to eventually pursue directing, and wanted to then benefit from this experience, by observing the director's process from beginning to finish, from a highly-magnified vantage point.

Having these personal goals helped me keep focus on my initial intent in accepting the position of dramaturg, which was to answer that complex question I was unable to answer at the beginning of this reflection: what does a dramaturg do? Throughout this process, I

found that my personal goals were in fact small snapshots of what a dramaturg does, but not necessarily what a dramaturg is limited to doing. Over the span of a year I was surprised to find that none of my goals necessarily changed; they simply rearranged themselves in order of importance. And by importance, I mean relevance to the success of the play. The goals that were more self-advancing such as strengthening communication skills, and learning how to contribute in a production meeting were far more important at the beginning of the process than they were by the end.

I believe this occurred because my self-advancing goals were goals that developed skillsets within me that made me better suited for being a dramaturg. A dramaturg must be able to communicate, especially to a production team. So, it isn't surprising that I would work on those goals earlier in the process, achieve them, and then move on from them, while continuously and actively practicing them. By the end of the process goals like creating an interactive lobby display and understanding the dynamic between dramaturg and director were far more important, and were informed by the skillsets of communication that I had developed prior.

I am inclined to think that the personal goals I set out for this experience in dramaturgy were all through various degrees achieved. However, as stated before, some goals took precedence over others. Reflectively this makes me wonder if the goals I set for myself in this experience were all relevant to my cause. And to this question, I believe, they were. Had I been a more qualified dramaturg at the beginning of this process my goals would have undoubtedly been different, save for perhaps the interactive lobby display. This is because I had to set goals which developed the skills I would need to become an effective dramaturg, rather than set goals for things that required skills I did not yet possess. I have

learned from this experience that much like acting, at the infancy of anything whether it be writing, directing, or dramaturgy you have to allow yourself the ability to be process-oriented rather than product-oriented. The product will come, once you allow yourself the process of learning how to create it, and that is something I will try to remind myself from now on.

Aside from my personal goals, there were also many artistic goals developed for the production of *Silence* that influenced my experience as dramaturg. These production goals were developed in many ways, however the majority of these goals surfaced from long in depth conversations conducted between the director and me, which laid the groundwork for a very collaborative relationship. Together, we identified a few core thematic elements early on in the process, which shaped how we and ultimately the actors and designers approached the production. We decided that themes relating to power, autonomy, privacy, nationalism and fear of the other ultimately drove the play, and thus represented its core.

Knowing this, from then on it was my duty to point out to the director when those themes were effectively being translated to an audience, and when they were not. My job as dramaturg aside from gathering and relaying information, became about also serving the director as a tool for perspective, analysis, and recall. I performed the role of an active audience member for the director, reminding her when I felt any of our key themes were being muddled or lost entirely.

This sense of agency and camaraderie with my director ultimately gave me the confidence to be as active of a participant in the molding of this show as I possibly could. No matter what, I voiced my opinion, because the director and I had created a safe space in which discussion was always welcome. I realize now that the intimate relationship I had with my director is only one example of how a dramaturg and director might work together, but I

believe this particular dynamic was beneficial for us both and for the show. In the future I will aim to develop similar dynamics with directors, because I now know, within the context of this particular dynamic I function well as a dramaturg.

I thoroughly enjoyed and benefited from the arrangement I experienced with my director while working on *Silence*. I feel that the closeness of the arrangement led me to feel more like a teammate and less like a student. I never felt that the director considered my opinions inferior, or that she patronized me in any way during our many deliberations. I think this ultimately allowed me to be more daring in my learning. I had little fear of failure, because I knew if an opinion or idea I supplied ever did not serve the play the best, I was not going to be reprimanded for having suggested it; rather the director and I would simply work together to find a better solution.

For the most part, all of the thematic goals set for the play remained the same from what was established in February of 2016 on through the actual production in February of 2017. In fact, some of the themes were so ingrained in the script itself that they became latent, and to some degree forgotten, but ever present. These were the themes such as power and autonomy. During the rehearsal portion of this process, power and autonomy were the themes that once established maintained themselves. Once I helped to initially point these themes out to the actors and designers, I didn't have to put much effort dramaturgically in keeping them alive or clear. And I'm sure most of that is to the credit of the director. From my personal observations as a dramaturg I think the themes of power and autonomy were some of the most impactful themes as well as long lasting. This was especially true for the actors. During a rehearsal I once asked the actors if their character had, made, or took power, and from then on that was a major character developing question for them all.

Interestingly enough, Power and Autonomy later became the themes I decided to develop more heavily with the interactive lobby display towards the end of the process. I felt that if I could in some way guide and or prompt the audience into reflecting on the concepts of power and autonomy that they would then at least subconsciously connect those concepts to the play, and in doing so see the weight those concepts held within the context of the play, and also perhaps their own lives. Ultimately, I believe this was perhaps my most successful artistic choice as dramaturg, and one of my largest contributions to the show.

Other themes in *Silence* developed far later in the process, and to a large degree were influenced by (then) current events (the 2016 presidential election); these were the themes such as nationalism and fear of the other. These themes unsettled me. As an artist you always want your work to be relevant and perhaps even relatable. However, it was as dramaturg in *Silence* that for the first time in my life as an artist, I was fearful of the compatibility between the fake world I was helping to create, and the real world I had to live in. It became easy to answer the question “why this play now?” the tyrannical 1002 a.d. England depicted in *Silence* wasn’t very different from 2016 America, because both were governed by other fearing, nationalism inspiring leaders. But for myself, it also became difficult to pinpoint how producing this show might inspire change. Reflectively I’m still not sure. I know producing *Silence* when we did was important, even if all it did was hold up a mirror to the audience that watched it, but beyond that I still am not sure how it functioned in fixing the things that through it were illuminated as being problematic.

And then there were also the themes in *Silence* that initially were regarded as incredibly important to the success of the play, that slowly inched their way out of the production entirely. They did that without anyone noticing until they were gone and no

longer needed. Those were the themes such as privacy. I think that speaks volumes again on the process-oriented, fluid nature of theatre. Nothing is ever set in stone, and as much as it was my responsibility as dramaturg to point out to the director when I stopped seeing the theme of privacy in the production highlighted, it was also my job to know when to just let it go. Because of this, if asked were all goals developed for the production achieved? I'd have to say no. Not all the goals we initially developed saw the light of day. That being said, the ones that mattered did. And it is in my opinion that it is to the benefit of the production that the themes that didn't matter, were not focused on.

Up until this point my reflection on my time as dramaturg for *Silence* has been incredibly positive, because it was a very positive experience; however, for the sake of sincerity and comprehensiveness I feel that I should also disclose some of the obstacles I encountered with this position as well. For instance, not everyone involved with *Silence* granted me the same respect as my director. And I don't believe this "disrespect" was directed at me personally, but rather towards my position as dramaturg. It is my opinion, given my few experiences with dramaturgy that A) it is a thankless job, this is because your work is in many ways an invisible collaboration in a field where many of your peers literally get applause for their work. B) a good deal of theatre artists especially here in the U.S. have yet to learn how to appropriately utilize a dramaturg. Some of this convolution in my opinion is due to the ill-defined job description accompanying that of dramaturgy. Either a dramaturg is regarded as a "made-up" position and their authority is compromised, or a dramaturg is overburdened by responsibilities not necessarily belonging to them.

One of my biggest frustrations with the experience I had in acting as dramaturg for *Silence* came from the cast and designers. On many occasions I felt the actors involved with

Silence regarded me as expendable, and unnecessary. Ironically, I think some of this may have been due to a majority of the actors' involvement in cultivating a small sum of research for *Silence* themselves, over the previous summer's study abroad trip. While studying in England the class on an individual basis researched different historic topics for the production of *Silence*, which bases itself in 1002 AD England. Because a good deal of them already felt informed on the play, I often felt labeled as redundant, before they even heard what I had to say. And in the same breath that I felt slightly expendable and unnecessary, I also found myself on the other extreme feeling a bit taken advantage of.

While the actors made me feel expendable and unnecessary from time to time, the designers alternatively made me feel like I was wasting my time. I know that none of this was inherently intentional by either party, but that doesn't negate the frustrations I felt as a dramaturg. I with the help of several students who participated in the previous summer's study abroad program conducted immense research on 1002 A.D. England. There was a plethora of information gathered on the Anglo-Saxons, Viking culture, medieval religion, and even early French royalty. There was so much information in fact that as a dramaturg I had to organize it to even begin to know what all we had. And for the convenience of the actors I also developed individual Google drive folders, so that they could more easily find the information most valuable to their individual character and even in doing this I found myself being asked the same questions repeatedly. Alternatively, and perhaps more frustratingly I thought that the designers disregarded my research entirely. They would ask me for research on Anglo-Saxon furniture, and I would perform said research only to find come opening night that they decided to build a Norman period bed instead. It wasn't until after the production process was complete that I realized all of the designers greatly appreciated and

took into account my research. That being said the designers had to make artistic decisions that may have waived slightly from my research, due to many factors, and ultimately the sake of the production.

As frustrating as this all was, I am thankful to have experienced these obstacles. Because I believe it prepared me to experience it again and to find ways to ultimately navigate similar situations in the future. That isn't to say I have any plans to pick fights with future actors or designers; rather, I would like to use this knowledge to develop stronger tactics in performing the role of a dramaturg. Because in retrospect I'm sure there were choices I made in self-advocacy as well as in facilitating dramaturgical information that weren't the strongest. For instance, I know now that with a show like *Silence* individual Google drive folders may not be the best means of communicating pertinent information to a cast. I believe this is due to imbedded fashion of Google folders, which causes you to have to go through multiple folders to find the one you're looking for. Difficulty navigating Google folders for the information I cultivated was a concern of the designers as well. And in the future I will look for an alternative.

One of the most rewarding parts of being a dramaturg is seeing your work manifest itself in the show. As I stated before dramaturgy is a thankless job, but it's also so incredibly rewarding. I was given the opportunity to work with a show from beginning to end for the duration of approximately a year. This time was allotted no doubt, because of the ridiculous amount of research required of a dramaturg to best contextualize the world of a play, and then be able to reiterate it to someone else. I got to know this show like a good friend, and I saw my work as a dramaturg manifest itself in this show everywhere.

I saw my dramaturgical work manifest itself in the chainmail worn by one of the

Anglo-Saxon warrior character, Eadric Longshaft. I saw my dramaturgical work manifest in the actors evaluating if their characters had, made, or took power. And I saw my dramaturgical work manifest in the audience, while they stood in the vomitorium interacting with a lobby display I created, considering for themselves if they actually had autonomy or not. I saw my work manifest itself everywhere, and it was— for lack of a better phrase— totally awesome. Did people know those things were by various factors the result of my work? No. Did they need to know that? No. Would I have liked them to? Maybe a little.

If I had been asked to define “Dramaturgy” a year ago, I would have made a joke or two about how silly the word sounded. And then I would have given a brief lesson on the etymology of the word so as to sound worldly. I would have said just enough about dramaturgy and around dramaturgy to sound like I knew, ultimately just talking in circles. But I wouldn’t have dared try and explain what a dramaturg did, because a year ago what a dramaturg did was far too big of a question for me to try and answer. Now more than a year later, if I were asked that same question, specifically in regard to what a dramaturg does, I’d answer without the slightest hesitation: Everything. A dramaturg works to gather as much pertinent information for a show as possible, a dramaturg then share that information with many different people to both answer questions with, and ask them.

Being dramaturg for *Silence* can easily be among one of the most frustrating, difficult, fun, exciting, and rewarding, things I have ever done. I am immensely grateful to have been encouraged to pursue this position, let alone trusted with it. Dramaturgy takes a great deal of patience, discipline, and humility, and these are all qualities within myself that need to be exercised more regularly. I learned a lot of practical skills in serving as dramaturg, because they were needed in the process of achieving a product. For instance, I learned how

to create a dramaturgical timeline, and how to create a concept for a lobby display, and even how to use a large format printer for the first time in my life. And all of these skills I'm sure will benefit me in the future in some way.

However, the most valuable thing I learned in being a dramaturg this past year is in direct reference to myself as a person and an artist. For the amount of work that goes into being a dramaturg it makes sense then to always work on art that invigorates you. Art that you find purposeful. There were so many times I wanted to give up this past year, because things got hard. And beyond the reassurance of my advisor and fellow artists, what kept me going was knowing the importance of the show being produced. Had I not cared about *Silence* and what it could accomplish, I wouldn't have made it to the end.



Autonomy

[aw-ton-uh-mee]

noun, plural autonomies.

1. independence or freedom, as of the will or one's actions; the autonomy of the individual.
2. the condition of being autonomous; self-government or the right of self-government
3. a self-governing community.

Synonyms for autonomy

noun Independence

Freedom Self-government Sovereignty

Self-determination Self-rule Liberty

Accord Free-will Choice Volition

Who deserves
to choose?

Antonyms for autonomy

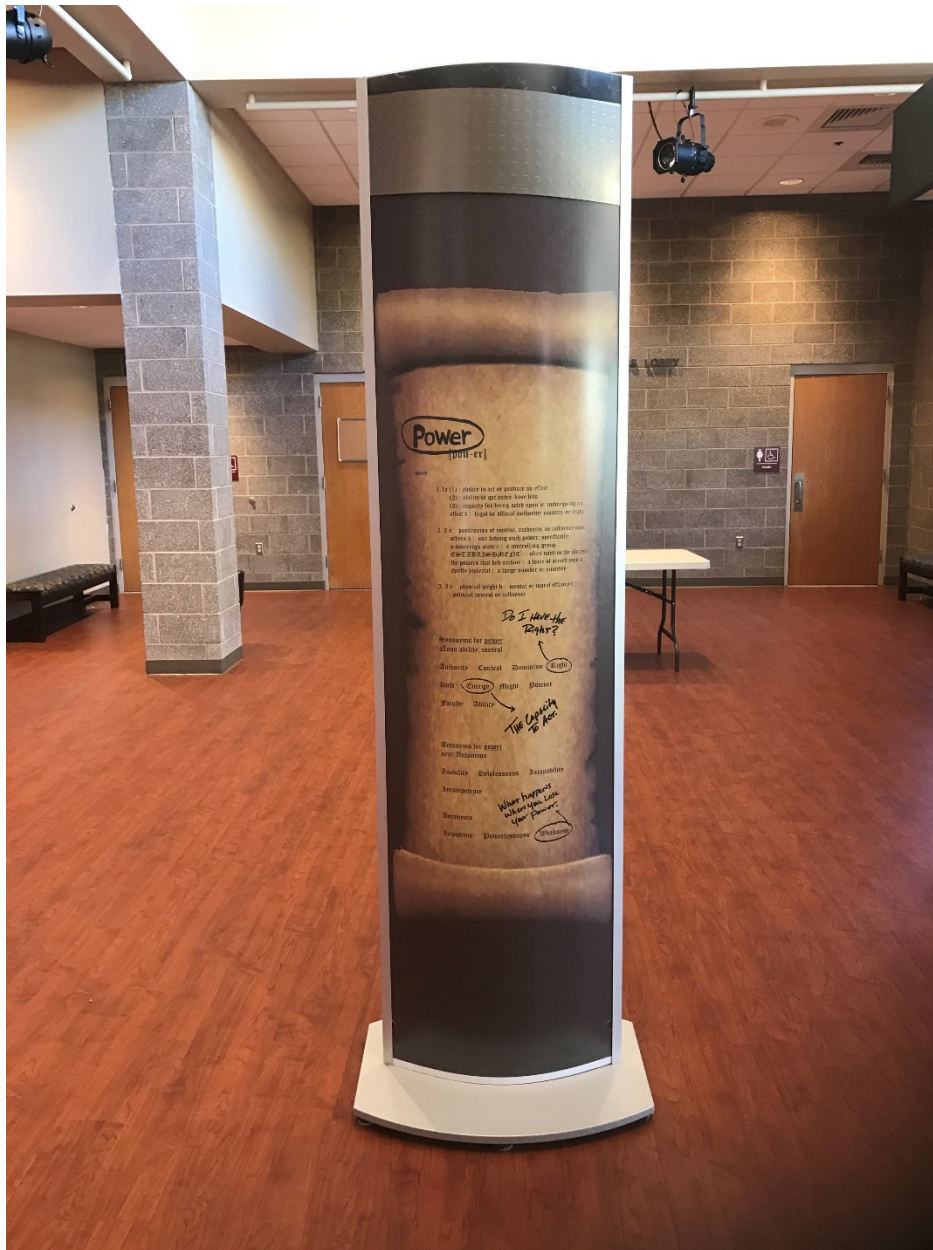
near Antonyms

Force Duress Coercion Constraint

Antonyms

Dependence Heteronomy Subjection

Outside
of ME →



Power

[pau-er]

noun

- 1.1a (1) : ability to act or produce an effect
(2) : ability to get extra-base hits
(3) : capacity for being acted upon or undergoing an effect b : legal or official authority, capacity, or right
2. 2 a : possession of control, authority, or influence over others b : one having such power; specifically : a sovereign state c : a controlling group : *the powers that be* d : a force of armed men e chiefly dialectal : a large number or quantity
3. 3 a : physical might b : mental or moral efficacy c : political control or influence

Do I HAVE THE Right?

Synonyms for power
Noun ability, control

Authority Control Dominion

Will Energy Might Potence

Faculty Ability

THE Capacity To Act.

Antonyms for power
near Antonyms

Inability Helplessness Incapability

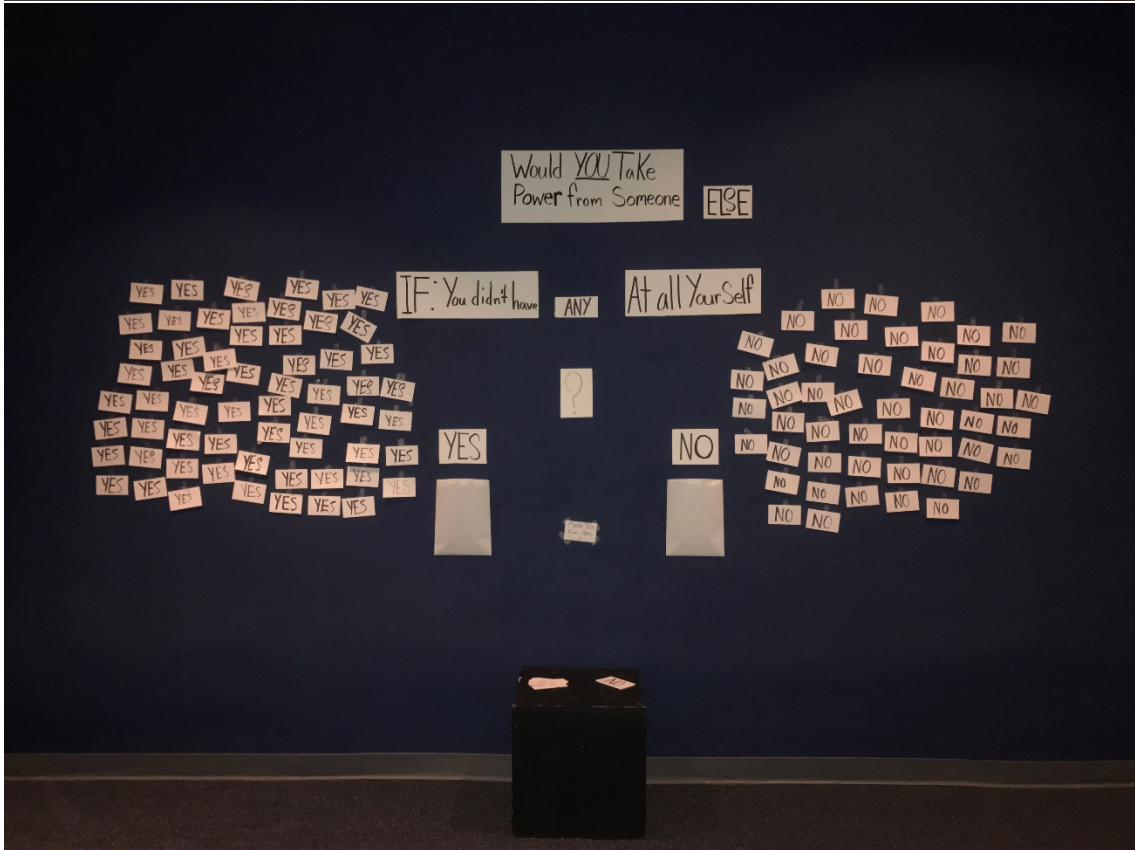
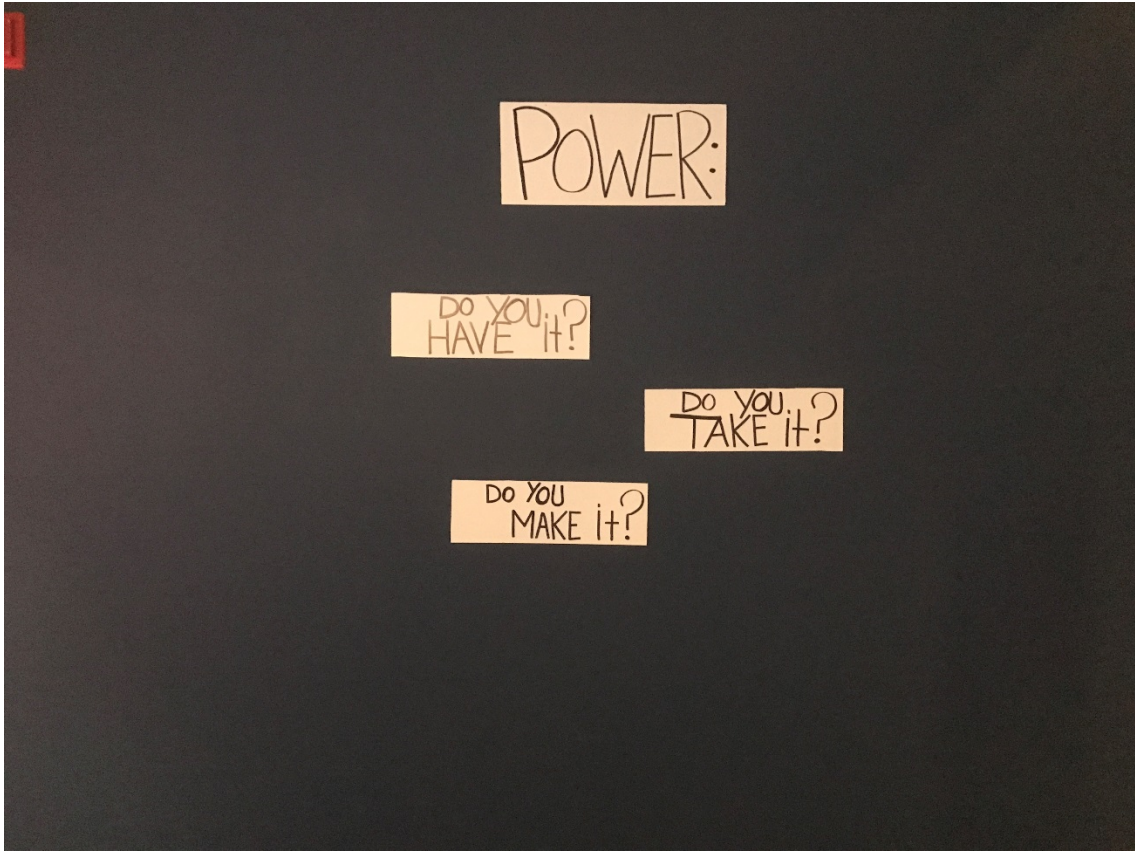
Incompetence

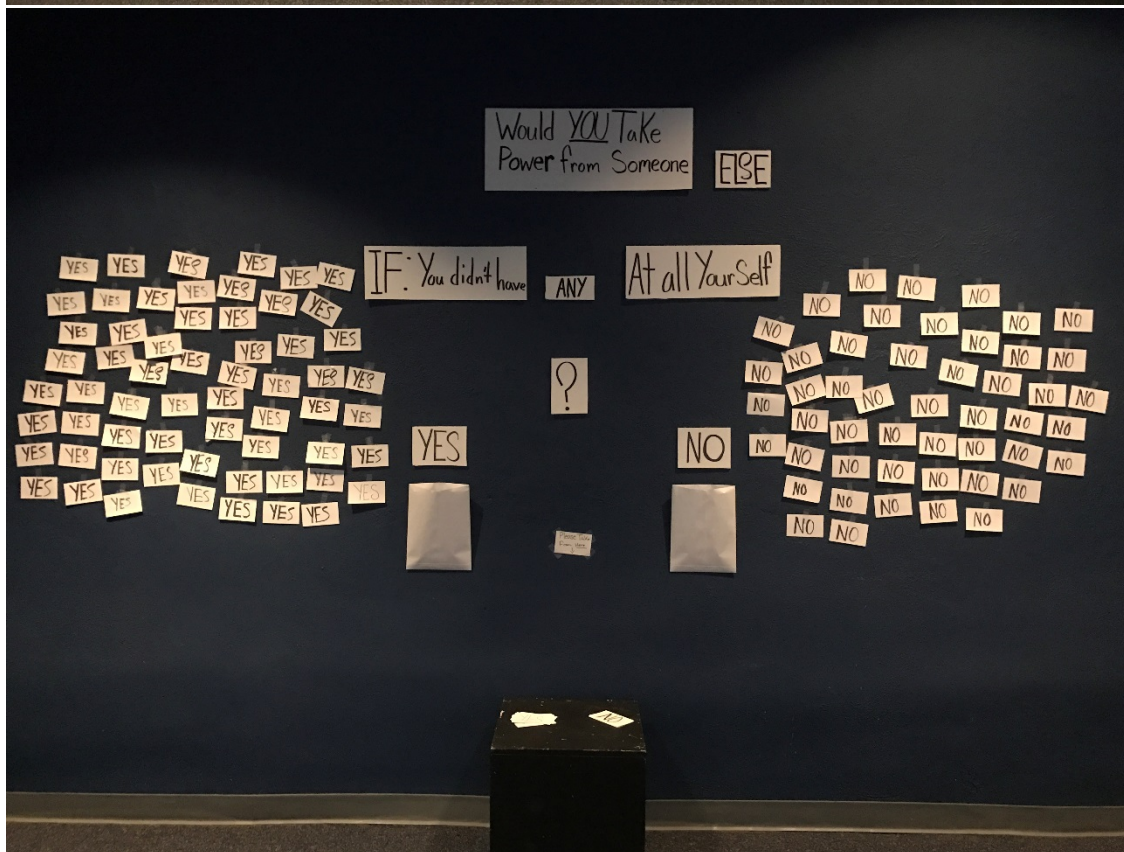
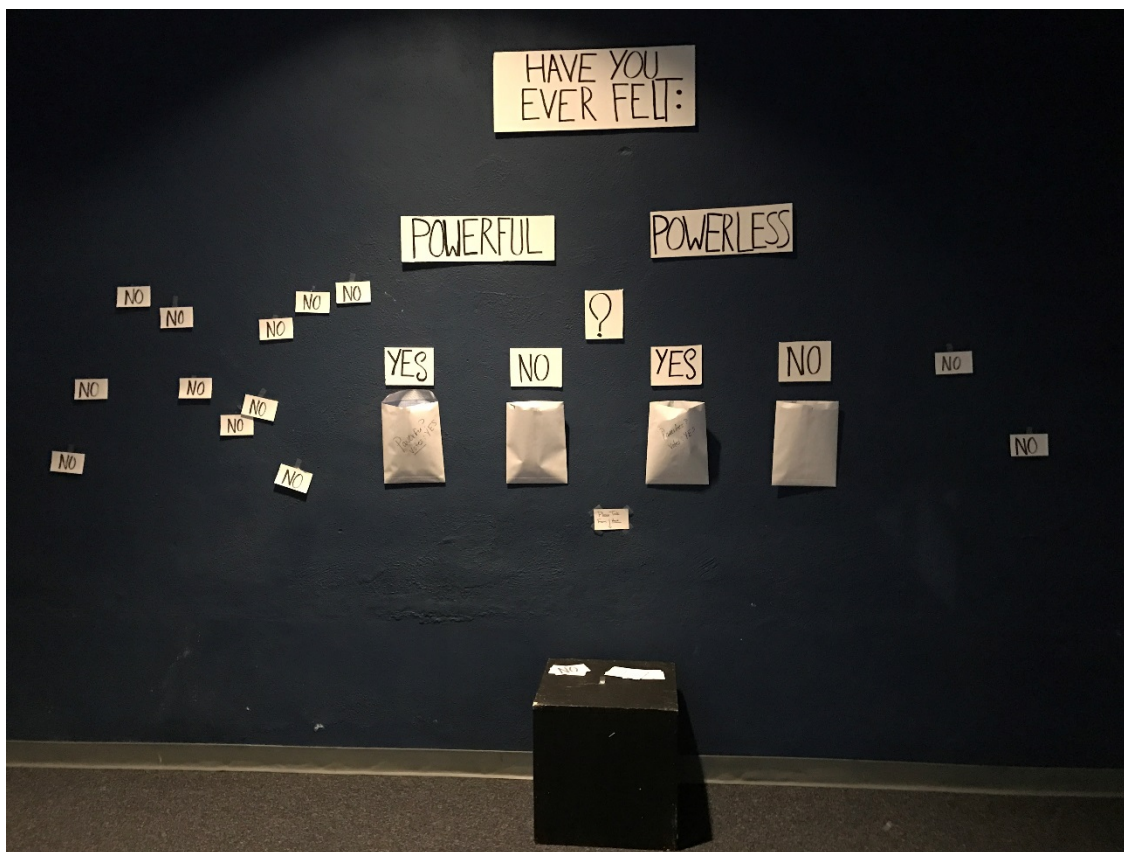
Antonyms

Impotence Powerlessness

What happens when you lose your Power?

Weakness





Above are photos taken of the interactive lobby display developed by Jenna Tonsor, for the 2017 production of *Silence* by Moira Buffini, at Appalachian State University.

Recorded Findings:

Have you ever felt powerless?

No: 2 Yes: 106

Have you ever felt powerful?

No: 11 Yes: 80

Would you take power from someone else, if you didn't have and at all yourself?

No: 49 Yes: 61

Do you have autonomy?

No: 58 Yes: 62

From these figures we can assume that at the very least over a five day production 106 audience members participated in this lobby display. We can also suggest that up to 429 audience members participated in this lobby display. However, it is more likely that a sum between these two is the actual total for participants.

Below is a link to a Dramaturgical Website (History Research) for *Silence*

<http://tonsorje.wixsite.com/silencedramaturgy>